

Subject area:	Community development at county level.
Project title:	Wicklow Outdoor Recreation Strategy
County:	Wicklow
Date of project:	2008 – to be completed in 2020

Purpose:

A coherent vision on how an outdoor recreation culture* should be developed, coordinated and sustained in county Wicklow. This is the first ever Irish countywide recreation strategy.

Aim:

Five strategic objectives have been identified for the planning period 2009 – 2013, that collectively, will help to achieve the agreed vision.

1. Integrated outdoor recreation management.
2. Improving opportunities and facilities for sustainable outdoor recreation.
3. Supporting conservation through outdoor recreation.
4. Promotion, education and raising awareness.
5. Stimulating outdoor recreation tourism and entrepreneurship.

Inspiration:

The inspiration for this project came from Brian Kehoe, Chief Executive, County Wicklow Partnership, who saw that a collective, collaborative approach between landowners, land management agencies, individuals and national agencies could enhance the development of outdoor recreation at a county level. The development of the strategy ensured that these relationships aren't taken for granted and are managed, respected and developed. Working together into the future, the strategy shows how the county can use its strengths to increase local economic benefit and enhance the health and well-being of their local population, while respecting the spectacular natural environment which is the source of these opportunities.

*'Outdoor Recreation Culture' refers to 'sporting, recreational and holiday pursuits based on use of the resources of the countryside and which contribute to healthy active lifestyles.

Includes land, water and air-based activities, e.g. mountain walking, kayaking and pony trekking.

Excludes sporting activities on confined courses or pitches e.g. golf, football, show jumping etc.

Extent of the initiative:

The strategy includes the entire county of Wicklow and covers activities under the following heading:

Air	Water	Land
Aeromodelling	Canoeing	Bird-watching
	Coarse angling	Clay Pigeon shooting
Aviation	Game angling	Countryside walking
Ballooning	Jet skiing	Field Archery
Gliding	Rowing	Field sports
Microlighting	Sailing	Hill walking
Parachuting	Sea fishing	Horse riding
Hang-gliding/Paragliding	Sea kayaking	Mountain running
Popular flying	Sub aqua	Mountain-biking/off-road
	Surfing	cycling
	Swimming	Triathlon
	Water skiing	Adventure racing
	Wind surfing	Bouldering
		Orienteering
		Rock climbing
		4/2-wheeled motorsport



Lower Lake at Glendalough

An essential part of the programme was collaboration with partners, in all one thousand people and organisations gave feedback to this programme:

Key themes.

Key themes that emerged from consultation and collaboration process are summarised below:

Recognising diversity

Representatives of less mainstream activities generally reported their perception that a lack of a national priority for these activities was associated with fewer funding opportunities, greater difficulty in achieving legitimate access to the activity environment and a general lack of recognition of key aspects of their pursuit.

Informal participation

The suggestion to establish more informal types of network was also made, to broaden participation in outdoor recreation; by young people, people with a disability, low-income groups for whom club membership may not be easy to access and those for whom formal club membership is not desired.

Value of community events

The important role played by outdoor recreation events in Co. Wicklow was also valued in the responses given by communities, including; the 'King of Greystones' Triathlon, the Wicklow Mountains Autumn Walking festival, the BMW Round Ireland Yacht Race and other local events offering informal opportunities within communities to celebrate outdoor recreation.

A thriving membership

Most activities had clubs that were based in the county and were knowledgeable about and sensitive to access issues. This helped to reduce any potential for conflict in the use of the resource. The majority of clubs reported a significant increase in membership over the past 2 years, with triathlon, mountain biking, bouldering (a style of rock climbing), canoeing, kayaking and orienteering reporting particular growth.

Size and relative importance

An activity did not need to have a large number of members for its presence in Co. Wicklow to be important at a national level. For some less mainstream activities, the review revealed the importance of Co. Wicklow as a venue. An example is bouldering and for this activity, Co. Wicklow presents an ideal environment. Other less well known activities showed a high growth trend, including coasteering - this may include swimming or adventure swimming in calm water; rough or white water; and/ or tidal currents, as well as climbing, scrambling, sea level traversing, jumping and diving; and triathlon. Clubs reported that younger people are in particular drawn to these types of activities.

Hidden profile, hidden revenue

Some activities seemed to have an importance that was unrecognised, despite the relatively large membership and use patterns. An example was the range of traditional 'countryside pursuits', including for example, game shooting which has a reported 27,000 membership nationally. In many cases, these activities had a long history in their local communities and had significant potential as a uniquely rural activity for tourism development. It seemed that some more individual type activities, were also relatively hidden in terms of the revenue that they generate in the county. One such example was horse riding. Horse riders were more likely to be local, were more likely to

purchase equipment locally and were more frequent in their use than other activities. There are 11 riding clubs based in Co. Wicklow, representing approximately 500 members.



Riding Club.

Self-sufficiency and advocacy

Some clubs reported that their activity did not urgently need a strategic county response, since the existing clubs and networks catered well for the needs of the membership. Representatives of angling clubs demonstrated this profile of self-sufficiency. Co. Wicklow is an important location for angling clubs, of which there are 200 clubs in the Eastern Region of Ireland with approximately 20-30 clubs operating in Wicklow. Membership ranges from 20-200 people in each club.

Broadening participation

It was notable that many activity clubs and networks did not typically focus on broadening participation in their activity to young people, participation by low-income

groups or people with a disability. Some however, do have a strong focus on young people, including 4 of the 5 sailing clubs in Co. Wicklow. In addition, the importance of the existence of the Baltinglass Outdoor Education Centre as a centre dedicated to encouraging participation by young people was emphasised in the review.

Scale of the project:

This is a large scale project which spans eleven years and relies on the collaboration and partnership of many different groups, organisations and individuals. It encompasses the whole county of Wicklow.

Time Line:

2008

- Review of existing activity and discovery of main issues through the following means:
 - Interviews held with over 30 outdoor recreation providers, managers, community representatives and other outdoor recreation interests to March 2008.
 - Communication with 90 plus outdoor recreation clubs and outdoor recreation enterprises in Co. Wicklow.
 - Contribution made by the Wicklow Uplands Council's Environment & Recreation Panel in November 2007.
 - Discussion held with the County Development Board membership in March 2008.
 - Survey of community groups completed in April 2008.
 - Survey of outdoor recreationists completed in June 2008 – 680 respondents completed surveys online, describing 34 activities they did in 2007 in Co. Wicklow and making more than 800 suggestions for the improvement of outdoor recreation facilities and services.
 - Public meeting held in May 2008 to discuss indicative research results and issues.
 - On site survey of 139 walking visitors to Glendalough completed in the summer of 2008.
 - Discussion of initial strategy proposals and good practice examples by the study partners and other relevant experts in July / August 2008.
 - Agreement of strategic objectives, initiation of main partnerships and decision to form Co. Wicklow Outdoor Recreation Committee to January 2009.

(One thousand people and organisations contributed to the public consultation exercise.)

2009

- Research, interviews, surveys and public meetings were held in order to establish a shared vision for the recreation strategy.
- The strategy was thereafter compiled by Brian Kehoe, Chief Executive, County Wicklow Partnership.
- Alignment with policies and good practice.
- Initiation of main partnerships.

2010

- The first stages of implementation of the plan.
- Establishment of a county management structure and the establishing the following action plan:

Integrated Management

Actions

- Establish Wicklow Outdoor Recreation Committee (WORC)
- Appoint a programme co-ordinator
- Incorporate objectives in other local plans
- Co-ordinated approach to trail planning

Opportunities and facilities

Actions.

- Manage visitor access along key corridor routes
- Prioritise infrastructure at four hubs – Roundwood, Blessington, Glendalough/Laragh & Rathdrum
- Pilot access facilities – kayaking, equestrian & paragliding
- Community walking and cycling trails

Supporting Conservation through outdoor recreation

Actions

- Network organisations with role in environmental education
- Reduce environmental damage from illegal activity
- Erosion control measures

Promotion and Education

Actions

- An outdoor recreation brand for Wicklow
- 'Wicklow Outdoors' website
- Community sampling initiative
- Foster skills development
- Certified outdoor recreation management award

Tourism and Entrepreneurship

Actions

- Feasibility study on recreation potential of Blessington Lakes
- Network of outdoor recreation providers
- Encourage outdoor recreation businesses
- Pilot 'Walkers Welcome' initiative in Tinahely



'Lauch of Wicklow Outdoor Recreation Strategy'. (Left to right: Ruth Pritchard,RSP Consulting. John Treacy,Irish Sports Council. Tom Gregan,County Wicklow Partnership.Helen Lawless,Wicklow Uplands Council. Cormac McDonnell, Irish Sports Council. Brian Kehoe,County Wicklow Partnership.)

Supporters:

Project Management Committee:

County Wicklow Partnership, Fáilte Ireland, Irish Sports Council, Wicklow County Council, Wicklow Uplands Council, Coillte, National Park & Wildlife Service, Wicklow IFA

Expert Advisory Group:

PMC plus community, landowner, commercial, statutory reps. - e.g. Wicklow County Tourism, Tinahely Area Development, Co. Wicklow VEC, Blessington Forum, H.S.E.

Organisation: The Cappoquin Community Development Co Ltd (CCDCL) is a company limited by guarantee and has been granted charitable trust status by the revenue commissioners. It is a run by local volunteers.

Partners:

Coillte.

Fáilte Ireland.

Irish Sports Council,

The National Parks & Wildlife Service.

Wicklow County Council.

Wicklow IFA.

Wicklow Uplands Council.

Wicklow Rural Partnership Ltd (LEADER).

Finance:

The capital development of the available recreation resource base in Co. Wicklow has been funded by the Irish taxpayer under the National Development Plan. No direct funding is made at a county level for the maintenance of outdoor recreation facilities and fees are not typically charged for access.

A recent investment in recreational trail development has been substantial and welcome. This investment makes good on the promise in the National Development Plan and reiterated in the Rural Development Programme 2007 – 2013, to support the development of walking tourism. The purpose for this investment aimed to promote outdoor recreation

enterprise and in particular, investment by private landowners. One relevant example is the Walks Scheme, which pays private landowners for the maintenance of a small number of nationally important walking routes. The establishment of the role of Rural Recreation Officer (RRO) in Co. Wicklow in 2008 allows the Walks Scheme to be implemented at a county level through the further development and maintenance of the Wicklow Way. The role of the RRO is also to market and promote walking routes in the County.

Main beneficiaries:

The local community. Those living and holidaying in Ireland.

Relationship to wider objectives of The Rural Development Programme (RDP): The project is directly related to the objectives of the Rural Development Programme and received funding from the RDP.

Practical comments

Problems encountered:

To date little information has been available on how many people recreate in Co. Wicklow or the kinds of contribution that this activity makes to the rural communities that welcome outdoor recreation visitors. Together with the fact that the sector is relatively new and fragmented in Ireland generally, this has made it very difficult for interested groups to plan for the further development of the outdoor recreation sector into the future.

Background information on Wicklow:

The population of Co. Wicklow grew by 23% over the past decade, reaching a population of some 126,194 people in 2006. Like other counties, Co. Wicklow has benefited from the economic upturn of the last 20 years and Co. Wicklow is the 7th most affluent local authority area nationally.

This is not the whole story however; a high proportion of retail expenditure outside the county, lengthy commuting times, the difficulties of persuading day visitors to extend their trips and a lower than desired availability of county-based employment – all demonstrate the draw of both people and revenue away from Co. Wicklow to the capital city on a daily basis. In addition, significant pockets of disadvantage are evident in Co. Wicklow.

Under-represented groups in outdoor recreation activity include for example, people on low incomes, people with a disability and non-national or new residents.

Co. Wicklow is a significantly rural county despite the recent expansion of important urban towns such as Bray, Wicklow and Arklow. Almost one third of Co. Wicklow's population live in a rural area and farming is extremely important to the way of life in the county, contributing to our sense of identity.

The majority of Wicklow's rural areas are considered to be under strong urban influence, with some areas in the west of the county having a traditionally strong agricultural base. The agricultural sector accounted for 4.68% of all employment in 2006 – down from 5.1% in 2002. A steady decline in income from farming has only increased interest in alternative on-farm enterprises.

Co. Wicklow's food products, including the renowned Wicklow lamb, but also now incorporating a growing organic vegetable and artisan food product, testify to the high quality of farming practice in the county. Local farmers markets allow recreationist visitors to connect with rural communities and embed rural tourism in the local economy.

This county is uniquely placed to benefit from the increased interest in participating in outdoor recreation activities. One third of Co. Wicklow is above 300m and most of it is over 200m. The county has an ancient history – shown also in the proliferation of archaeological sites, artefacts and field monuments in the county. With its associated distinctive glacial u-shaped valleys, corries and lakes, the central mountainous area known as the Wicklow Uplands has helped to shape a highly diverse environment and in turn, the social and cultural identity of Co. Wicklow.

Co. Wicklow benefits from marine recreation resources along 66km of coastline, with important beaches and much loved lake recreational resources close to communities such as Roundwood and Blessington. Co. Wicklow is also home to important cultural and natural attractions that offer recreational amenities, such as Russborough House, Avondale Forest Park and a BirdWatch Ireland managed nature reserve at Blackditch. In Co. Wicklow, some 14.5% of the overall land area is owned by Coillte and dedicated to commercial forestry.

Much of the forest trail network in the county is readily used by local communities and by visitors, primarily for walking, but also for other activities such as orienteering.

Contact person: Brian Kehoe, Chief Executive, County Wicklow Partnership

This case study could not have been compiled without the generous co-operation and assistance provided by Brian Kehoe, Chief Executive, County Wicklow Partnership and Isobel O'Duffy, Rural Development Manager, Co. Wicklow Partnership. April 2010.

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